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ABSTRACT

Attention within counseling psychology has broadened in the last decade to include the larger community within which an individual exists. Measures of the eight elements of community identification by Roberts (1980) were administered to students on two residence hall floors. The group on one floor served as an experimental group and explored in four sessions, ways to enhance community. The other group served as a control. Both groups were again questioned at the end of one semester. Analyses of results showed a new emphasis on involvement with each other and possibly on leadership on the experimental floor. Results also indicated that the Roberts-identified areas not revealing differences were those pertaining to physical environment, change and continuity, trust, and purpose. Those areas most consistently different involved perception of the social environment and coping skills. (PAS)

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AN INVESTIGATION OF COMMUNITY: FUTURE FOCUS FOR COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY

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An Exploration of Community: Future Focus

for Counseling Psychology

ABSTRACT

The present research investigated the concept of community. Measures of eight elements of community identified by Roberts (1980) were administered at the beginning of the semester to members of two residence hall floors. One floor explored in four sessions ways to enhance community. The other served as a control. The questions were administered again at the end of the semester to both floors and the results were analyzed. No differences were found in the initial comparison. A few differences were seen in the (still continuing) semester-end comparison.

An Investigation of Community: Future Focus for Counseling Psychology

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Since its inception counseling psychology has focused its efforts on the individual. While the individual presumably will remain the focal point, attention has broadened in the last decade to include the environment in which the individual finds her or himself (Delworth, 1979; Hurst, 1978; Greenfield and Wong, 1976). Within that framework the concept of community offers promise as a base on which to build an environmental psychology of hope. Fuller understanding of community can lead to enhanced individual development.

A major barrier to further understanding the value of community in individual development consists in the dearth of measures of the concept. Operational definitions developed by sociologists (Bell, 1972; Bernard, 1973; Poplin, 1979; Warren, 1963) have focussed on propinquity, common location, and other readily observable behaviors. The difficulty with these definitions for present purposes lies in their relative lack of psychological meaning.

Despite the efforts of community psychologists such as Gottlieb (1977) and Kelly (1977), progress toward understanding the psychological sense of community has been modest. Little has been done to build on Sarason's (1974) exceptional work.

Roberts (1980) presented an extensive review of the concept of community, with particular emphasis on application to higher education.

In that review Roberts hypothesized eight areas as constituent elements of the broader concept. To oversimplfy, the eight areas consist of: (1) supportive social systems, (2) commitment (3) accessibility and other physical environmental characteristics, (4) trust, (5) shared purposes or goals, (6) mutual help and support, (7) involvement in community organizational structure, and (8) change and continuity.

While Roberts did not offer operational definitions for all these variables, their essentially psychological nature should be evident, even from the titles offered above. In some instances Roberts even went beyond operational definitions to suggest specific assessment devices, as in the instance of locus of control, suggested as a measure of organizational involvement.

The project to be reported in this paper builds on the elements posited by Roberts to investigate the sense of community on two university residence hall floors.

Method

Measures

Measurement devices were identified or developed for Roberts' eight areas of community. 1. Involvement in organizational structure, the locus of control measure developed by Rotter (1967). 2. Commitment (supportiveness), a scale developed for another study and used with several experimental programs (Williams and Sawyer, 1976). 3. Shared goals, scales developed in the study just referred to (Williams & Sawyer, 1976). 4. Trust, a semantic differential scale developed by LaCrosse and Barak (1976). 5. Mutual help and support and 6. Accessibility were assessed simply by one question written

for this study about each of these two elements. 7. The extent of social networking (supportive social systems) was evaluated by asking participants' levels of involvement with each of the other primary members of the group. 8. Change and continuity was tapped by three questions asking about perceptions of history ("tradition") and future of the group.

Procedures

A university residence hall was selected as the site for this test of the ability to affect participants' sense of community. A proposal was made to floor residents to work toward an enhanced sense of community. Each of Roberts' eight elements of community was examined with the residents to determine how that element can be changed to increase their sense of community. A pre-intervention assessment of participants' perceptions of community was administered on this floor and on a floor picked by residence hall staff to be comparable to the one selected for the intervention. No difference was identified on the pre-test between the two floors.

The residence hall floor selected for intervention was all female. The choice was made in a conference of campus hall directors. The comparison floor was solicited from the same hall by the author. The total number of residents on the experimental floor was 16; on the control, 21.

The intervention program began at the start of the spring semester. Although the plan was initially to examine in a separate session each element of Roberts' conceptualization of community, that plan had to be compressed when the realities of available time were faced. The elements were discussed in a total of four sessions rather than eight.

Data Analysis

While a return rate sufficient to permit data analysis has been obtained, data still are coming. Except for the established scales; e.g. trust, items were analyzed individually. The data support only chi square analysis. Time constraints forced abandonment of the final locus of control scale. No differences occurred on the initial scales.

Results

As shown in table one, more invitations were offered to fellow residents to participate in floor activities among the experimental than among the control group. Table two reveals no difference in closeness between the experimental group and the comparison group. Tables three and four show some indication that leadership encouraged more mutual support among experimental residents than among controls and a similar difference in staff availability. With current numbers of respondents these differences do not reach acceptable significance levels. Possible differences in match between individual and group interests are revealed in table five. The results to be seen in table six show that the control exceeded the experimental group in self-perceived decision-making and crisis skills. Finally, the comparison in table seven yields no more positive overall perception of community by experimental than by control residents.

Discussion

In retrospect it seems inevitable that these results would be equivocal. With the variety of variables operating in a group

living milieu, it is difficult to see how a few variables can be isolated clearly. Although the two floors compared here appeared similar initially (and certainly they were in terms of the measures used), very few floors are identical in all important respects.

Recognizing these qualifications, some discernible consistencies can be identified. Most importantly the results suggest an emphasis on the experimental floor on involvement with each other and possibly on leadership (both elected and paid ("staff")).

Among the Roberts- identified areas not revealing differences were those pertaining to physical environment, change and continuity, trust, and purpose. Those most consistently different include perception of the social environment and coping skills. Even though only one of the latter approached significance, all are in the same direction. All but two of the possible areas of difference favor the experimental floor.

Particularly since the results are not yet complete, any conclusions clearly must be tentative. The author's experience with the study of community is very limited as yet, but he was struck by the reflection in the data of phenomena observed in visits to the floor. Probably few researchers have failed to feel as the results accumulate that they reflect the researcher's perceptions and beliefs about the phenomena under study. Therefore only further investigation will reveal the true promise of the measures used here and of the conceptualization originated by Roberts.

Many directions are open in as uncharted an area as this one. The author plans only to pursue a few of the possibilities. (Indeed

that is all his time and energy permits.) The immediate plan is to extend the present format to a full year and thus, hopefully, to provide the time intended in the present investigation to explore the individual elements of community. A second direction entails expanding the investigation to different types of community, the Greek system, other university organizations, and off-campus communities.

At this point direct implications for professional practice are few. The author believes the promise thus far justifies encouraging other professionals to attend more systematically to community in the setting in which they find themselves. Unfortunately this area of knowledge is not much advanced beyond the stage of Robert's and Sarason's insightful theoretical propositions. Thus the best recommendation that can be offered at this point is to encourage others to join the study and to contribute to our knowledge about community. No better conclusion can be reached now than to hark back to the title of this paper. Despite the dearth of empirical data, the concept of community promises to serve as a focus for counseling psychology in the nineteen eighties.

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Table 1. Number of Efforts to Include Non-Participants

Group	Few, None Not Much, etc.	Several, Everyone Many, etc.
Experimental	2	8
Control	13	5

Chi Square = 5.11 $p < .05$

Table 2. Closeness to Other Floor Members

Group	Close	Moderately Close to Distant
Experimental	6	4
Control	6	12

Chi Square = 1.44 n.s.

Table 3. Leadership Encourages Mutual Support

Group	Agree	Disagree
Experimental	9	1
Control	8	8

Chi Square = 2.69 n.s.

Table 4. Availability of Staff

Group	Little/Moderately	Highly
Experimental	2	8
Control	10	8

Chi Square = 2.03 n.s.

Table 5. Interests Match Group Interests

Group	Very little to moderately	Quite a bit to almost identical
Experimental	3	6
Control	11	6

Chi Square = 1.39 n.s.

Table 6. Decision-Making and Crisis Skills

Group	Highly Able	OK or Less
Experimental	0	10
Control	8	11

Chi Square = 3.94 $p < .05$

Table 7. Overall Feeling about Community

Group	Negative-Neutral	Positive
Experimental	1	9
Control	6	12

Chi Square = .82 n.s.